Courage My Friends Podcast Series X – Episode 6
From Ecosystems to Economics: How Canada's Conserved and Protected Areas Contribute Billions to the Economy

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.
Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: When it comes to Canada's growth and prosperity, do we really have to choose between the environment and the economy? What is the economic value of Nature? How does conservation support reconciliation? And what is the case for recognizing our protected and conserved lands and waters as vital economic assets? [music]

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In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome to Episode Six, *From Ecosystems to Economics: How Canada's Conserved and Protected Areas Contribute Billions to the Economy.*

In episode six we welcome national director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Sandra Schwartz and CPAWS economic analyst, Jason Wong, lead author of the CPAWS white paper, *Widely Enjoyed but Inadequately Valued: Understanding the Economic, Environmental and Health Benefits of Canada's Protected and Conserved Areas*. We discuss the first of its kind report that offers a new way of valuing conservation and the protection of our lands and waters, not as barriers to economic growth, but as long-term and essential green infrastructure that enriches our lives, our communities and our economy.

Sandra, welcome back. And Jason, welcome. Sandra, you are the National Executive Director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. So tell us about CPAWS.

SANDRA: So CPAWS is a national organization. We've got 13 regional chapters across the country, plus a national office. And basically what we work on is conservation. So conservation of both land, fresh water and ocean. Our national team works on that as well as our regional chapters, albeit they work on it from very much of a regional level.

So if you think about, like BC for example, our BC chapter would be working on protected areas in particular. So our view is that more than 50% of land and ocean

needs to be protected. That's what the science is telling us. And so we essentially work on projects that look at protecting land, fresh water and ocean for generations to come.

So permanent, permanently protected. Those are what we would think of as something like a national park, marine protected area. But they can also be in the provincial or territorial context, provincial park, territorial park, or also smaller sort of conservation places, but these are all in the public domain.

So there are organizations like the Nature Conservancy of Canada that work on private places. And Ducks Unlimited, for example, where they purchase lands. We don't do that. We work specifically on public lands and public land protection. So oftentimes, we would be looking at areas that require cultural protection or require protection because there's great ecological value of those spaces. And we would work in partnership with local First Nations, local community and so forth.

Conservation, just like a big major project, for example, takes time because you're going from you know, if you equate it to something like a big mine getting developed, protected area's kind of similar. The land use is different, but you're still looking at using those lands or protecting those lands.

So you take the same kind of consultation time. You're doing feasibility studies, you're looking at species research, all of that kind of stuff.

So CPAWS is involved in that whole ball of conservation work. But we're predominantly an advocacy organization, working to advocate for protection of land and waters in Canada.

RESH: Thank you. And, and you all have been at this for, what is it, over 60 years now, right?

SANDRA: Yeah, over 60 years. We were founded in 1963.

RESH: Okay. So Jason, talk about your role at CPAWS.

JASON: Absolutely. So first off, Resh, it's a pleasure to join you and Sandra today. My name is Jason Wong. I'm the Economic Analyst at CPAWS. And what I try to contribute to the team here is to add this economic perspective on why conservation and particularly investing in protected areas is a major green engine of growth and prosperity in terms of our finances and economics as well as our social health and wellbeing in communities across the country.

So we work in close partnerships with our regional chapters as well as with a variety of allies to champion conservation, particularly Indigenous-led conservation and how this can offer a blueprint for Canada to be a nature positive economy.

RESH: Thank you. So Jason, you are also the lead author of a new report that CPAWS released in February called *Widely Enjoyed, But Inadequately Valued: Understanding the Economic, Environmental and Health Benefits of Canada's Protected and Conserved Areas*.

Now traditionally, we've valued Nature in one of two ways. Either qualitatively, for it's social and aesthetic and health and spiritual or joyful benefits, those things that are essentially priceless, right? And, but then on the other hand, we have valued it in terms of resource extraction, the ways in which Nature is something to be exploited for profit.

But this report takes a new approach to how we value Nature. So, Jason, what is this new approach?

JASON: Absolutely. When we first looked at this problem, we encountered a lot of experiences that people would think of conservation, of protected areas as a trade-off. That it's something that's nice to have, but when it comes to growing the country or when push comes to shove that we're giving up something to protect these vast areas of say forest or wetlands or marine areas.

And so our main objective here for our report was to really highlight these enormous, both tangible and intangible benefits that nature brings every year. So this is not a one-off, but these are recurring benefits that grow over time and benefit, we're talking about generations of Canadians.

And our report looks at the economic, the environmental, and the health and wellbeing benefits of all protected areas that currently exist in Canada.

And so really we're trying to produce these concrete numbers and evidence that showcase how nature and conservation delivers on a triple bottom line. That when we invest properly with federal government leading the way, that we can deliver these benefits, particularly to rural communities, isolated communities, you know, to offer another way to make their living really, as well as leading to cleaner air, as well as leading to healthier, to, to better mental health for Canadians across the country.

So that was really the aim of our report here,

RESH: Right? And then triple bottom line is people, planet and profit just to explain that.

SANDRA: Yeah, so just to jump in too and for your listeners to understand, you know, why would an organization that works on protected areas hire an economist?

I think some of my colleagues, before we brought Jason onto the team, were kind of scratching their heads and saying do we actually want to put a value as you, you said Resh about do you actually wanna put a price on Nature?

And so the point of this was not to put a price on it. The point was actually to have a different way to talk to decision-makers, to businesses and to Canadians about the value that Nature brings us beyond just the cultural or the personal aspects, you know, going out for a walk in Nature. That there is an actual value.

And so, you know, if we think about these places that we talk about wanting to protect, they're often widely enjoyed by Canadians, but their full value isn't properly reflected in public policy or in economic decision-making.

And so we wanted to make sure as an organization that governments better recognize Nature as essential infrastructure. So that, you know, as I mentioned, big major projects, Nature itself is an essential infrastructure that supports communities. It supports their wellbeing. It supports long-term prosperity as well. And so the idea behind generating a report like this and beyond.

So this was a first report, a first of its kind in Canada. And we're very lucky to have Jason on our team. But having Jason stay on the team looking at individual protected areas too and being able to converse with local community around the economic benefits and social benefits that are incurred through this work is really important.

And reframing the conversation around land use from one of, we have to give this up as Jason was saying, to actually thinking about a reframe as this is not a constraint on growth. Protected areas are not a constraint on growth, but that they are investments and they're investments that generate measurable returns and reduce long-term risk.

RESH: And this report has also been peer-reviewed by the C.D. Howe Institute. But again, going back to what you're saying, Sandra, so this is essentially saying that these are investments that can be quantified into the national budget. That this can be counted into the gross domestic product of the country.

SANDRA: It should,

RESH: It should be.

SANDRA: It should, it should be counted.

And there was reference to this actually in last week's announcement by the Prime Minister. And so by setting up a panel of experts who are gonna be talking not just about conservation financing. And you know, it's not to suggest that governments are getting out of the business of conservation or paying for conservation of public lands, but that there potentially is a role for other players within the financing of conservation as well. As well as ensuring that the public accounts of Canada, and potentially also provincially, territorially are thought that Nature is actually part of the accounting that's done.

RESH: Right. And so let's get into the numbers. The numbers are pretty stunning. So overall, and I'll go back to you Sandra, how much money are we talking about?

SANDRA: Well, it's a significant contribution. And I'll, let Jason go into detail, but just to share with your listeners, the protected and conserved areas that we currently have in Canada contribute $10.9 billion to Canada's GDP and they support more than 150,000 jobs.

This is a return on the investment that governments have been making in protection across the country. 'cause it has real economic benefits to our labour force, to our government accounts, so to GDP as well as in tax revenue.

RESH: Jason to you, because also, according to the report, over a 15 year period from 2008 to 2024, a 50% funding increase for Canadian park agencies led to between 50% and 250% rise in their contributions to GDP and labour income and tax revenue. Why has such an impressive return on spending been so undervalued or even overlooked by policymakers to date?

JASON: I think one of the things that we've tried to illustrate with our report is how these investments, these activity that's happening in these protected areas is deeply interconnected and intertwined with other parts of the Canadian economy. And so that really, when we're talking about, say, a national park, it's not operating in a bubble. But that it directly has impacts on say construction companies that come in to build maybe a new education center, to establish new trails. That the jobs and the dollars that we're talking about benefit, you know, a really broad segment of the Canadian economy. And so that's what we're seeing here when we look at these numbers and these increases over time that you just mentioned. As we continue to build, not just investments, but also the trust, the relationships and the expertise in these protected areas, that it leads to this increasing return over time.

And once again, just to hammer home this point, parks don't tend to pack up their bags and leave the country when, when the tax scheme gets unfavorable, right? Like some other multinationals might do. This is a great infrastructure that stays and benefits Canadians for generations to come.

And once again our report is highlighting this enormous value, this true scope of value that protected areas bring to Canada.

RESH: Okay. And just to for further clarification, when we're talking about protected and conserved areas, again, what do we mean?

SANDRA: So we mean things like national parks. But again, it's not limited to just these large national parks. It can be provincial parks, it can be Indigenous protected and conserved areas. It can be marine protected areas, national wildlife areas. There's a range of different types of protected areas within the public domain.

You know, if you think about areas for migratory birds and birds that would migrate between important ecological zones around the world, those are areas, for example, that would be protected. Oftentimes they're areas that because there's deep ecological value, or that there's a species that really needs to be protected, you'll set aside areas for those. But oftentimes it's also for cultural values.

And so if you think about some of the national heritage sites, for example, these are also a form of protection. So it's much broader than just a park, though those are certainly parts of the landscape.

I mentioned protecting important cultural sites, but protected areas aren't just about protecting landscapes or seascapes, they support community wellbeing, they support public health, recreation, local economic resilience. And as Jason was saying, if you think about construction. Once a place is identified, sometimes there are huts that are being constructed. They're setting aside areas for campgrounds for people to recreate in, setting trails, all of those things.

And then certainly the tourism operators as well that stay in those areas to ensure that there's a lively tourism sector also in those areas.

So it's not just about nature and what it supports in terms of mental wellbeing, stress reduction, and so on. There is real economic value. And in essence, we could say there is a conservation economy that is currently not being accounted for.

RESH: That's interesting. And when you're talking about jobs, again, you're talking about those that are directly tied to conservation, but the whole employment ecosystem around that, right? So like the restaurants and the hotels and all of this. Another figure from the report is that every dollar spent on protected and conserved areas by both government and nonprofits, that for every dollar $3.62 cents is generated in visitor spending. So ecotourism, is that the major industry here?

JASON: So absolutely tourism is a significant part of the spending that happens in protected areas. But that visitor spending is looking at all different kinds of just how people spend money in these areas. It could be tourism. It could be for scientific research, for certain expeditions. It could be for cultural reasons.

And so it is just, once again, intertwining all of these benefits across these vast parts of the Canadian economy and just really highlighting how protected areas are an integral part to sustaining so many different activities and industries across the country.

RESH: Right. So when we're talking about jobs, are we talking about full-time jobs, part-time jobs? What type of income? Because all of that is in the report. So what types of jobs and what are the community benefits and what types of communities?

JASON: So our report is really looking at all of the jobs that are supported by these protected areas, that because these areas exist, that these jobs are there. They're supported by these areas.

And so that includes part-time. It includes full-time. It includes incredible work, particularly the Indigenous Guardians Program, which is a program that trains and equips members of Indigenous communities to act as stewards and monitors of the land around them and which they traditionally use.

So when we're talking about not just achieving, in terms of providing a job or giving income to somebody, it's also a concrete way in this case to advance ideas of reconciliation, to build different understandings and knowledge systems that have spillover effects on how we manage, how we best manage and maximize the values, the benefits we can receive from Canada's incredible landscapes and seascapes.

And I also wanted to say that for many of these figures that they're a conservative estimate. We've taken a cautious approach on how we've modeled these numbers. But that this is really just a baseline. That these are underestimates and that they're expected to also increase over time as these areas become more developed and established.

RESH: Okay. So how do conservation-based, and I know this is early because again this is the first report of its kind. But how do, or how could conservation-based economic benefits compare to the economic benefits from, say, extractive industries like the oil and gas industry?

SANDRA: Certainly when you think of it on the scale of other job creators or even in terms of GDP. I mean, $10.9 billion to GDP is a significant impact. That is not a small amount.

When you think about the labour income at 6.6 billion or the tax revenue at 1.4 billion, again, those are examples of high numbers. Those are not just minuscule.

At a local level, while they sometimes may sound smaller than what you might get from a larger extractive industry, the reality is that in many of these oftentimes rural, remote communities, we don't see young people staying because there are not job opportunities. And yet conservation and these protected areas have actually helped keep people in their communities. And this includes Indigenous, young Indigenous Peoples who are working as Indigenous Guardians. Yes, there's a handful of them, but it's still employment. And so Jason can speak directly to some of the numbers associated between conservation economy versus other extractive industries. But, you know, at a local level, these jobs do matter.

RESH: Yeah. And it is an important point that it is supporting people to stay within their communities because we do know that the rural to urban drift has been increasing and not for good reasons.

SANDRA: Absolutely.

RESH: Particularly when it comes to Indigenous populations who then face a host of issues as urban Indigenous populations, particularly when they just get here. But yeah, Jason, go ahead.

JASON: Absolutely. So at a, you know, high macro level, we're finding that our protected areas contribute around $10.9 billion to Canada's GDP. As a comparison, the offshore oil and gas industry in that same time period, came in around $8.3 billion. So we're talking directly about extractive industries, I mean, our protected areas are outpacing some of these well-established and well-regarded extractive industries in terms of how much they contribute financially to the Canadian economy.

I'll take you over to a trip to Newfoundland Labrador and the Gros Morn National Park, which is one of the case studies we did for the report. And as Sandra was pointing out, the majority of our protected areas are in rural areas. And when you're talking about places where perhaps they traditionally relied on fishing in Gros Morn, and how those opportunities have dried up as those industries have collapsed or they become more automated, opportunities that are offered, such as leading boat tours, because of the Gros Morn National Park, potentially allow a fisherman, for example, to stay on the water, to work in a job that's still meaningful to them, but allows 'em to continue, you know, providing for their family in a way that's congruent with their whole identity.

And so when we're talking about the benefits that a lot of times these protected areas provide things that optionally or simply aren't there. And when we're talking about keeping the social fabric of a community alive, it's like, okay, now that I have a job here, I don't have to move out. I don't have to move to the big cities.

And that might mean that the local school there doesn't have to close because now they have enough families staying in there to sustain enrollment. And that directly relates to the fabric, the cohesion of the community that allows it to remain vibrant.

And that's exactly what we see in the communities around Gros Morn National Park. That now they have like a internationally recognized writers festival. That they have new infrastructure, including a medical clinic established because there is this national park and there's green infrastructure around.

From the national level down to the local level, protected areas provide an enormous array of benefits to Canadians.

RESH: Yeah. And very much as you're talking about social capital, right? Keeping these communities and these cultures alive.

Now, over the last decade, really under the Trudeau administration particularly, we've been talking about just transition to a green economy, green jobs.

Is the report making the case or could it be making the case that conservation-based economic activities could actually replace extractive activities or industries?

SANDRA: We shouldn't be looking at it where it's a replacement. Because I think that ends up juxtaposing, you know, is this industry good, this industry bad?

This is about how you work on a working landscape in tandem. And that these are activities that aren't about replacing, but that they are about growing. And so what we're trying to show as well through this report is there is a path for continuing to build up the economy by continuing to invest in public land and water conservation.

And so this report came at an important time, I would say, where there was a lot of public debate around, you know, environment versus the economy and looking at these things as opposing priorities. And I think we have to stop thinking of these as opposing priorities. They can go together.

It is about identifying areas through good land use planning exercises where okay, if an industrial activity's required, we also need to look at having protected areas.

You know, you're not gonna put a mine for example, in a park, but that you can look at that working landscape potentially differently and you can also grow the economy through both.

And I think that's the message we're trying to deliver. Is that looking at the economy versus the environment is a false choice. It shouldn't be a choice. It can go together.

RESH: All right. Now, you did mention the timing of the release of this report. This came in February, so talk about the timing, because this was about the expiration of conservation funding.

SANDRA: Yeah, that's right. And I think when we were, when we were conceiving of this report, the nation was in a very different state than you know, a year later. The timing, of course of its release mattered. Not only it was ready, let's go, it was also let's make sure that we're seizing the opportunities as they presented themselves.

You know, for months we'd been hearing from both the Minister of Environment, Julie Dabrusin, as well as the Prime Minister, that Nature really mattered to the Carney government. And we weren't really seeing a lot of results of that. Whether it was the MOU with Alberta being signed, and your listeners might remember when that happened. We had Steven Guilbeault, who was one of our strong champions in Cabinet, leave Cabinet, over that signing of that document. We also had seen a government who was pushing forward with major projects across the country. And, you know, questionable about how much climate protection or biodiversity protection was being considered in the projects and in the assessment of those projects. For example, if you're gonna speed them up, where was the consideration of both climate and biodiversity concerns?

So within that context, where we kept hearing something was coming, we've got a new plan, it's gonna be released, we said, well, we're not seeing anything yet. We need to release these numbers ourselves. And, you know, we are very much welcoming of the federal government's, commitment to invest $3.8 billion, which Prime Minister Carney announced last week. And they had talked about investment of 3.8 billion, by the year 2030. So just over the next four to five years to protect Nature specifically.

And it's a very encouraging signal. We've been waiting for several months. I will say we were frankly, I will share with your listeners wondering, was something coming? Was something coming?

RESH: And, and you, and you, along with three other national conservation leaders signed an open letter to,

SANDRA: We did.

RESH: Prime Minister Carney called, the *Clock is Ticking on Canada's 30 by 30 Commitment*. And that was talking about the March 31st expiration. And then the government came out and said, here is this 3.8 billion. So it worked Sandra. Good job!

SANDRA: Yeah. Well, I mean, I, I would love to, I would love to take some credit for keeping the pressure on. That is the job of, of an advocate.

RESH: Take the win. Take the win.

SANDRA: But you know, and it was an encouraging signal. Yeah, for sure. That, that Nature is on the federal agenda. I mean, I will put it this way, Resh. You know, to your listeners, 3.8 billion is gonna sound like a huge number, right? For those of us as thinking about pocketbook issues, that's a large number.

In the scale of investments, it's significant, but it you know, it's an announcement that a Minister could have made.

The fact that the Prime Minister made this announcement, I will say was a strong signal to our organization and to others that the Prime Minister himself does consider Nature to be important, and that he himself wants to be seen to be doing something on Nature protection. So, I'll say that because I do think that that was notable, that it was an announcement that the Prime Minister himself made.

At the same time though, announcements are only meaningful if they actually lead to durable protection on the ground. And so the success of the strategy that was announced last week is really ultimately gonna depend on how quickly and effectively the government moves from their commitments to action.

And so an expansion of protected areas is going to be very important for Canada to meet the targets that it has committed to meeting. So 30% protection by the year 2030.

But we would also say, and I think Jason's report very much points to, it's also maintenance, stewardship, monitoring, and the long-term care of those protected areas, because that's also where the jobs are.

It's not just in creation, it's also in the long term maintenance. And the ongoing tourism and so forth that comes with that.

RESH: Right. And again, this 30 by 30, target is part of the global commitment that Canada as part of 196 other nations signed onto in 2022. And this was the Montreal-Kunming Biodiversity Agreement.

But Jason, to bring you in on this, so talk about 30 by 30. We are in 2026. We're four years away from 2030. How are we doing so far in actually meeting that target?

JASON: So we just had these revised statistics, and in terms of meeting the 30 by 30 targets, I think we're around 14% of the terrestrial areas and around 15.5% of the marine areas as of last count. And so I think from an initial stock-taking perspective, it looks like there's a fair distance to go.

But what I would highlight is that at the top of our conversation, we spoke on how the establishment of protected areas is a long-term process that is built on these relationships and trust and just honestly political will. Right? And that already in the process there's a number of candidate sites that are being planned, that are in the works. And that much of the time it just relies on the strong signaling and the strong leadership from our governments.

And so this is what I would say is that directly to what Sandra pointed out, that these positive signals coming from our federal government, that this is a priority, means that I think as a nation for Canada, that these 30 by 30 targets are something that we are striving for and that we should continue to aim towards. Not just for the sake of protecting our environment and nature, but also as the report points out, you know, $10.9 billion, hundreds of thousands of jobs and all the other benefits we've talked about, not just the economic ones. And why it's meaningful to continue working towards these targets.

RESH: Right. And also benefits in terms of the damage that we could be preventing. Because another, again, really huge number from the report, is that protected and conserved areas hold carbon valued at $51.1 trillion. So, Jason, back to you. Explain the importance of stored carbon and really how you came to this figure of over $51 trillion.

JASON: So when we broke up our report into these different values of protected areas, our environmental section looked at the amount of carbon that's stored in our

protected areas. And the idea is that anywhere in the world, if we emit, if we let loose another tonne of carbon or carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, it's gonna contribute towards global warming.

And that has knock over effects in terms of, you know, maybe the higher risks of flood, droughts, loss of crops, the range goes on and on down to your own home and how it could damage your own home. And so the federal government has come up with this social cost of carbon that reflects that, that the more we emit, the more damages it's going to cause to the globe.

And so what we did is we looked at all of the carbon that is stored in Canada's protective areas and multiplied that against the social cost of carbon to say that because we have protected and designated these areas for conservation, that these areas hold the equivalent of over $51 trillion in the carbon that they store.

And the reason why we're doing this is to again, highlight the variety of facets there are to the idea of nature's value. That beyond what it benefits us in, in the kind of traditional economic sense, we've covered that, now let's begin bringing in our policymakers and the Canadian public into all these other ways that nature benefits in terms of protecting us from heat waves. So we don't have a wildfire season every summer where firefighters lose their lives. To the very real benefits we get from our wetlands filtering and making sure we have clean water to drink. And so this is part of this long-term process that we've talked about at CPAWS on showcasing this wide suite of benefits of nature.

RESH: Right. And just to add that the more conservation areas that we have, it's not just about storing carbon in the ground, it's also about absorbing carbon from the atmosphere as well. It's carbon sequestration, but also carbon sinks.

JASON: So our report is looking at all the carbon that's stored right now in the protected areas, and a portion of that is also as you mentioned, this long-term sequestration. These bank vaults that keep this carbon safe and not causing this damage around the globe.

What we're trying to advocate for is this kind of strategic planning to properly look at these landscapes at these public waters, so that when we begin this calculus of should we build a mine there, should we start drilling there, that we fully understand what's at stake before we approve a particular project.

SANDRA: And Resh, I'll just add a point here as well, is that in Jason's analysis that was done here, those were very conservative numbers.

This was using an analysis that was well established. So this was not Jason, you know, deciding to use some, you know, questionable analysis. This was well-established analysis. There are others that have estimated far greater carbon.

RESH: What's, what's being left out then. You've said several times, this is conservative analysis. It says that within the report. So what makes it conservative?

JASON: I mean, just in the concept of protected areas alone. The areas that we looked at are the ones that are officially recognized by the Canadian government. But it's very important to recognize there are many, many areas that are stewarded, that are effectively protected particularly by Indigenous communities that aren't just recognized in that way.

So, you know, right off the top of the bat, in terms of the areas that we're looking at, we're only looking at a subset of what's really out there. In terms of our economic modeling, how we look at visitors, how much we count.

We know that not every dollar that people spend on snacks or going to a national park are counted. That agencies that work there just have these estimates that they pull from. But that the true impact across all these different sectors is likely much greater. And that the same thing holds true in terms of the carbon, , the environmental values. The data we have for that, once again, is conservative. It's not looking at these finely detailed pockets all across the country.

And similarly with the mental health, health and wellbeing. These are surveys. But we know that there's many more people that actually enjoy and use these areas than were given the chance to speak through these surveys.

So, in short, many, many reasons.

RESH: Many, many reasons. Now the other thing is that right now, more and more scientists are saying that we could be, or we're heading towards a sixth age of mass extinction.

So speak a bit more about the findings on biodiversity on the report itself and how conservation contributes to biodiversity?

JASON: So within the report, one aspect of it looks at these ecosystem services and the values that they provide. So the idea that the forest, how they might hold in the soil, how they might provide habitats for various species and how that benefits us. It puts a dollar figure on that.

So we have these values that range in the hundreds of billions for the areas just in Canada's national park system alone. So not all protected areas, just the national park areas, and we're already in the hundreds of billions of dollars. Right? So we have an approach to quantify it in that regard.

But when we look at the future work and what's possible to expand from what we've already done in this report, there's the idea of these key biodiversity areas, these pockets, these areas in the lands and the waters where we've highlighted these either, you know, critical or rare species that are at play and how we can also

account for those when we begin this big exercise of examining what the value of nature is.

So you know, there's lots of potential for future work and to continue to add on these other elements of nature's value in our report.

What we do know from the evidence and the experience that we have is that these protected areas are one of the best tools we have to protect biodiversity in Canada and globally.

RESH: And that's from the smallest to the largest species. Because I was also reading one of the case studies, I think is St. Lawrence Saguenay, talking about the beluga whales, its own population of beluga whales that has found a home within the St. Lawrence waterways as well, right.

JASON: Exactly, and I think that that offers a, a blueprint on how we can continue to grow those successes. We talk about the Saguenay-Saint Lawrence, they're already in the process of expanding, I think it's like nearly tripling the area under protection. These are clear signals around the country, even from local communities that conservation is working for a variety of reasons. And this is why we should continue to scale it and grow it.

RESH: Absolutely. And it should not be as it has been sidelined or treated as sort of discretionary funding or spending. Because as was mentioned, it is so intertwined with virtually every aspect of our lives, including as we talked about, jobs, economy. But Sandra also speak more about the health outcomes, how it supports our health, individual health, healthcare, but also our social health as well.

SANDRA: Well, there's certainly lots of studies that have shown the importance of nature to our mental health. Certainly during the pandemic we were seeing that when people weren't able to get together, so the social health side of it too, we did see people going out into nature and going out for hikes in just local parks. People who would be sitting at distances from each other in local green spaces. And it was that social connection that I think was really important during that time for mental health. But also people were saying, and we heard this quite, quite often, anecdotally, that going out to nature was the one thing that was getting people to feel motivated or to feel like, you know, the world wasn't collapsing around them. Was that they would see neighbors outside and while they had to distance, they still could interact.

When it comes to just the mental health side of things, the government of British Columbia a few years back created a program actually for their doctors to give out a, I can't remember the exact title of it, but it was like a it's a Parks Prescription.

JASON: Parks Prescription.

SANDRA: Yeah. Yeah. It was the prescription. So doctors can actually give a prescription to patients for time in Nature.

RESH: Really.

SANDRA: Yep. And this is a program because of the mental health benefits doctors in British Columbia have recognized this and have actually given these prescriptions to patients.

Again, it's not just anecdotal. There is good scientific evidence to show that time in nature reduces stress. It creates a sense of community. It creates a sense of wanting to protect what's around you too. Because you're not just going and recreating and enjoying, you're actually communing with the species, with the birds, with, you know, all the other creatures and trees and so forth that are out there.

I can say for myself, you know, there isn't a time that I don't go out into the woods. I'm really fortunate to live quite close by to green space here in Ottawa. And anytime I go out, I go and hug a tree. And that sounds so kind of kooky to have somebody who runs a nature organization to be like hugging a tree. But I literally hug trees.

And the reason I do that is because it reminds me of the strength that I get from this strong... Like if you think of a tree trunk and how strong that is, that infrastructure. And that when I might be feeling a little bit weak or that I need to lean against something, I lean against a tree 'cause it provides that backbone for me.

Also, it's actually good for the trees because trees communicate with each other through their roots and the root system. And so we have this assumption that a tree is this structure that has no feelings or has no, you know, 'cause it doesn't have a brain, but it does still communicate.

And it communicates with the creatures communicate as well. So it's my way of communicating with the spaces that I'm also in. And there is absolutely an element of mental wellbeing that comes along with that. There's stress reduction. I feel at any time I go out, that just everything I can just breathe.

RESH: Yeah. And overall this reduces healthcare costs as well.

SANDRA: Come in on this and ultimately reduces healthcare costs.

JASON: Yeah, I think just to reinforce that when we really look into this data, and we have thousands and thousands of respondents to these surveys, we find that it bears out these points that we're talking about.

We find that particularly for women and those with children, so caregivers, that they perceive these greater benefits than others from being in nature. So now we're introducing this idea that certain parts of our society, of our communities can receive

an even greater benefit. And like protected areas can be an even more effective way to address issues around mental health, around wellbeing.

And it's, you know, quite low cost as well. So we're talking about public policy, then this can oftentimes be much more beneficial than going to a drug store.

From personal experience, when I go to the Georgian Bay with my kids, my mental health is significantly improved when my kids can jump into like the crisp water and the shock and, just the happiness of spending that kind of time outdoors with my kids.

Just to highlight again, these kinds of benefits that our protected areas and our nature have on our mental health and wellbeing.

RESH: Yeah. And I'm sure many people can relate to this. I mean, Sandra, what you were talking about with the trees, I mean, you know, I grew up the trees hold up the sky and, you know, yeah it's that strength and jumping into crisp, clean water, just how that totally invigorates you. But go ahead, Sandra.

SANDRA: And I was just gonna say, I mean, some of the learnings that I've had in terms of communing with nature is while that's a very western kind of way of looking at things, i've learned a lot through spending time with Elders in my community and being out in a forest with Elders. Because, you know, they encourage you actually to lean up against a tree, to hug a tree, to sit on a rock, close your eyes and listen.

And listen to the sounds around. And when you see with your ears, it is a very different experience. Because you're really, you're seeing the vibrancy of nature around you and all the sounds. Whether it's a small little worm that's going under the leaves for example, you can hear that when you pay attention. And so you automatically have a different reaction. Your body and your cells have a different reaction when you're outside. And this is all things that I've learned through Elders as I've spent time with them in nature.

RESH: And it makes sense. I mean, we ourselves are a, this is getting very philosophical, but we ourselves are a microcosm of nature. Like the planet...

SANDRA: Absolutely.

RESH: we're mostly water. We breathe in and out carbon dioxide and oxygen. We're held together by a circulatory system. So what we do to the world around us, we're essentially doing to ourselves.

And just getting back to the social health. Conservation is very tied to identity. The report makes that case. And also to the reduction of social inequality as well.

JASON: Absolutely. So, once again, we'll head on over to the Gros Morn National Park in Newfoundland. So our local case study is looking, we spoke previously about

how because the national park is there, it holds that community in place and it roots those members there so that they don't have to leave the area.

But when we look at how people have taken up social assistance funds, that's offered by the provincial government that they've dropped by significant amounts over time. And you know, that is occurring at the same time that this national park has continued to develop and set down its roots and draw in more and more visitors every year.

So it's just continued to paint this coherent picture that aside from these economic returns, it reduces these uses of social subsidies, for example, which in turn frees up public money to be used on other things that can benefit the community.

On one hand, these protected areas are delivering these new jobs and new dollars. But on the other hand, it's also freeing up resources and lifting in many cases less well off parts of the community to be able to engage and participate fully.

RESH: And the more parks there are, then the more access there will be for more of these communities as well. So another reason for expansion of protected areas.

Now to continue our journey, because you mentioned two case studies already, but let's go into the third. The report also looks at the Great Bear Rainforest, which is a powerful example of Indigenous- led conservation. And a main focus of the 30 by 30 target is that it really is Indigenous-led conservation that is going to essentially get us there.

So what are some of the key successes or learnings from the Great Bear Rainforest?

SANDRA: Well, just in general terms, Indigenous communities are our essential partners in the creation, stewardship of protected areas.

That was not always the case.

And when we think back to, you know, old style wilderness conservation, it was actually about removing peoples from the land. And in some cases, I would say, you know, our own history as a nation wasn't always a really positive one for Indigenous Peoples, where they were removed from, forcibly removed from the land in order to create a park. That has since changed and has now for thankfully many years.

Because it's their knowledge, their leadership, and their rights ultimately that we need to respect as we're doing conservation planning and implementation. And that long-term success of many of these places really are gonna be quite dependent on meaningful Indigenous partnership, leadership as well.

And so specifically on the Great Bear Rainforest, Jason, I'll let you speak to that, but I would add one last point on this, just from very broad strokes.

You know, we don't talk as much about Truth and Reconciliation anymore and the Truth and Reconciliation principles, but conservation and protection of key areas is part of how Canada can meet its conservation and climate commitments in a more just and durable way that is also part of the Truth and Reconciliation of our country.

JASON: And in addition to these really important moral reasons on why we should pursue Indigenous-led conservation, once again, I'll pull you to the data. And what we're finding here is that it also makes sense economically and environmentally as well.

So the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia is a standout because it pulled together money from public, so from the government as well as from investors and philanthropists and set up a large fund. And what that's done is really empowered these Indigenous communities to have the resources to properly establish and invest in this protected area. And it's been an enormous success.

They're talking about more than doubling the amount of initial funds that they received in terms of pulling new investments and has sustained hundreds and hundreds of businesses there and just multiply the impact.

So when we start these conversations now about, say national priorities and infrastructure projects, it's important to keep in mind examples such as the Great Bear Rainforest that were based on this proper accounting and partnership with Indigenous communities that resulted in this economic success, environmental success and, you know, this moral fulfillment of our promises to Indigenous communities.

RESH: And when we're talking about Indigenous-led conservation, could you speak to some of the principles of what this means?

JASON: So this speaks to the idea that members of the Indigenous communities have decision making control.

I think in many, many cases, we often consider this step as a checkbox, as it's something on the list of things that do, that we need to talk to a person that's perhaps Indigenous and that's as far as that involvement goes.

And here what we're talking about now is firmly rooting the needs and priorities of Indigenous communities into the planning and also the operation and where the benefits flow, to make sure that these all are centered on the needs of the Indigenous communities who have expert knowledge in many cases of these lands and waters. And who are most invested because they might live there, they might have cultural practices tied towards these areas.

And so just from a everyday perspective of operating these areas, it makes the most sense to use and incorporate this wealth of knowledge that already exists there.

RESH: Lovely. Thank you for that.

So the Carney government, and I think you were sort of alluding to this, Sandra, Carney, has been positioning Canada as a resource powerhouse, that they're going to fast track oil and gas pipelines and mining operations. They're gonna accelerate AI and militarize the economy. And then we also have from March 31st this new nature strategy where it's the 3.8 billion that's gonna go towards conservation, more parks, more marine areas that are being created. And I know you say it's not an either or. But there seems to be sort of a contradiction that we're going to have more mining, more pipelines, but also more conservation. So how do we reconcile the two? How does that balance or what do you think of that balance?

SANDRA: Yeah, I think that's a great question because something we were talking about earlier, this is setting things up as a false choice. It's not a false choice.

What we need in Canada is basically consistent and credible policy that aligns economic, climate, reconciliation of biodiversity goals and not looking at these things in silos, but actually looking at it together.

And so, you know, a few years back the government put in place a policy around gender-based analysis, or it was GBA plus is what they call it in, in policy terms. And that every policy that the government looks at has to go through a lens that they're evaluating what the impacts on gender might be.

They've done the same on climate. And more recently when the government announced, it must have been about a year, I wanna say a year and a half, two years ago now, announced that they would be doing something similarly on Nature. And so that as they're evaluating projects, they need to consider what the nature impacts are going to be.

We haven't seen what that looks like per se, but this is what the intention is of this policy goal.

I think when we're thinking about major infrastructure projects, though, it absolutely needs to evaluate. And if we're also looking at pulling Nature into public accounts and properly accounting for the benefits that Nature also brings to the public purse, that maybe we're gonna start evaluating projects a little bit differently.

Because we may then be saying, well, is this actually, you know, is protecting it in this area, maybe actually a bigger economic gain than if we extract from this area.

But I do still believe that these pieces can go together. It's about better land use planning exercises, one which acknowledges that both are pertinent, both are valuable. And that it isn't that extractive is somehow better than. And so I think that's the point of this report is that you can do land use planning exercises, accounting for both.

And so really what I would say is the announcement was great on the 31st. But the bigger issue isn't just about one funding announcement. It's about whether government decisions reflect the true value of Nature over the long term.

And so we will wait and see if it will transpire in that way or not.

Ultimately, reaching Canada's conservation goals are going to require a continued effort. They're going to require long-term funding and stronger accountability. And so some of that accountability is in the policy realm. We may not see it in legislation. We may not see it in regulation.

But in the policy intention that as projects get built, that they account for the biodiversity losses. That they account for the benefits in economic terms and social terms as well. So that the analysis needs to be bigger than just an economic one.

RESH: And that's essentially what the key recommendations of the report are framed around. So in terms of the recommendations, Jason, I wanna bring you in here as well. So could you speak a bit more to some of the key recommendations of the report?

JASON: Yeah. So within the report, we highlight seven different recommendations for policymakers in Canada to continue to invest and make sure we maximize the benefits and the value of Nature in Canada.

The main takeaway here from those recommendations is that it's a matter, especially if we're talking about public lands, it's a matter of federal leadership stepping up and showing through funding, but mainly through the policy and the way that we conceive of conservation, which is exactly what Sandra was saying, to commit to this long-term process and to hitting our promises and targets that we've identified.

And so within these recommendations, there is lots of talk around properly monitoring, properly accounting for these things that are happening in the protected areas, all towards this end goal of truly understanding and finally recognizing Nature's value.

RESH: Lovely. And on that note, the CPAWS report *Widely Enjoyed But Inadequately Valued: Understanding the Economic, Environmental and Health Benefits of Canada's Protected and Conserved Areas* will be linked in the show notes to this episode.

Sandra and Jason, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure having you on the show.

SANDRA: Thanks so much, Resh. And if I could just say in closing that really ultimately this is about whether Canada's prepared to treat nature like the public asset, that it actually is. And the protected areas themselves support biodiversity. They support communities, jobs, long-term resilience, and we will keep pushing for

the kind of action and follow through that's gonna be needed to turn commitments into lasting protection.

And I hope your listeners have enjoyed listening to Jason and I today talk about our report, talk about some of the advocacy work we've been doing. And if interested they're free to reach out to any of us anytime, and help us with our work.

RESH: Lovely. Thank you for that. And we will also be reaching out to have you back on at some future point as well. So again, thank you.

SANDRA: Thank you so much, Resh.

JASON: Thank you, Resh.

RESH: That was Sandra Schwartz, National Director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and Jason Wong, Economic Analyst and lead author of CPAWS report, *Widely Enjoyed but Inadequately Valued: Understanding the Economic, Environmental and Health Benefits of Canada's Protected and Conserved Areas*. Links to the report and to CPAWS are posted in the show notes to this episode. Please visit the CPAWS page to find out how you can support their work and advocacy on nature conservation and protection.

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu. Thanks for listening.

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